

Herbert Read

The Drift of Modern Poetry

WE ARE sufficiently advanced into the 20th century to ask whether the poetry of our period has acquired any significant character. Its achievement, in a quantitative sense, is impressive: we should have to go back to the Elizabethan age for any comparable efflorescence. But we must not forget that English is now the native language of at least two hundred and fifty million people, most of them acquiring some standard of literacy as a birthright, whereas the great wealth of Elizabethan poetry was created by a small society not numbering, among its literate, more than a few thousands. If averages were of any account in this connection, our present rating would be miserably low.

The truth is that both numbers and literacy have been handicaps to poetry in our time. If we suppose that a law of probability would allow one genuine poet to every thousand children born, then twenty poets would stand a better chance of being listened to in a population of twenty thousand than would a hundred and fifty thousand poets in a population of a hundred and fifty million. Some principle of diminishing returns operates in literature no less than in economics. Indeed, our civilisation is so organised that the larger it grows and the more literate it is made, the more uniform it becomes in its opinions and the more liable to irrational hero-worship. It prefers to be represented by *one* great man, to crowd to the concerts of *one* great conductor, to the performances of *one* leading actor, and, finally, to recognise *one* great poet as the representative

of its collective taste. A critical discrimination that would estimate particular merits and give due attention to individual qualities is nowadays more often to be found on the racecourse than on the campus—and even there the public, left to itself, will select a favourite upon whom it will lavish irrational odds. The Elizabethans did have their favourite poets, but each was held to be as good as the other until proved otherwise. The apotheosis of a poet like Shakespeare was the work of later ages, and chiefly of our own.

My intention is not to deflate any of the great reputations of our own century, but if we are to arrive at an estimate of general characteristics we must take care not to be dazzled by individual glories. No poet has dominated our age, in the sense of giving to it a uniform direction or a uniform technique. If uniformity exists, it is in public opinion and not in poetic style. We might use the word *drift* to describe our course, a derogatory word no doubt, but one exactly descriptive of the tides and currents of poetic expression in our time. The so-called “age of Johnson” was an age rich in dogmatism, but poor in invention, the least original age in our literary history. If our own epoch has not been dominated by a single poet, much less has it submitted to a single critic, though there are plenty who wish it had been, and some who would dearly love to occupy the throne of the Great Cham. But we are now a literate democracy, and what we have to deplore is the dictatorship, not of an individual, whether poet or critic, but of a uniformly educated taste.

THE poetry of our century began on a soft and sensuous note, as if tired of its inheritance, timid to advance into new estates. The Victorian energy—the exuberance of a Browning or a Swinburne—had been expended. We listen to the weary voice of Arthur Symons's "Absinthe Drinker":

Gently I wave the visible world away.
Far off I hear a roar, afar yet near,
Far off and strange, a voice is in my ear,
And is the voice my own? The words I say
Fall strangely, like a dream, across the day;
And the dim sunshine is a dream . . .

I am at peace with God and man. O glide,
Sands of the hour-glass that I count not, fall
Serenely: scarce I feel your soft caress,
Rocked on this dreamy and indifferent tide.

This *fin de siècle* mood, with its concordant diction, dominated the first decade of the century. The visible world was alien. True, there were exceptions—the pessimistic poetry of Hardy, the realism of Kipling, the social protest of John Davidson. But these were particular sentiments, individual opinions, not part of the poetic essence of the period. Even in Hardy we find the same tired rhythms:

I idly cut a parsley stalk,
And blew therein towards the moon;
I had not thought what ghosts would walk
With shivering footsteps to my tune.

I went, and knelt, and scooped my hand
As if to drink, into the brook,
And a faint figure seemed to stand
Above me, with the bygone look.

I lipped rough rhymes of chance, not choice,
I thought not what my words might be;
There came into my ear a voice
That turned a tenderer verse for me.

The lassitude is in that tenderer verse, in moods of regret that inevitably fall into accents of the whispering gallery, ghostly echoes of the past. The only alternative for Hardy is an awkward artificiality—the artificiality of those lines on the loss of the "Titanic," where the "steel chambers" of the modern ocean liner are seen as "stilly crouching" "in a solitude of the sea," "the pyres" of "salamandrine fires." The

image of "this creature of cleaving wing" fatefully converging on "a Shape of Ice" is well conceived, well realised, but the accompanying machinery of an Immanent Will and a Spinner of the Years is a creaking structure copied from Schopenhauer, who designed it after a Greek model. It is not poetic—or rather, it is rhetorical, and like all rhetoric, a corruption of the poetic consciousness.

This same corruption of consciousness exists in two further figures who survived well into our century—Housman and Kipling. The tragic sense is keen in each, and when the war came their poetic interventions did not strike the participant as too unreal. But nevertheless, there is a factitiousness in both. Blood and sweat, spade and hearse, lad and lass, life and death—the antitheses are too easy—semantic marriages, not made in any passionate heaven or hell. True poetry is not so immaculate in diction. It is concentrated; it is crystalline; but its edges are sharp and cutting. Kipling knew this, and when he wasn't, as Henry James said, telling a story in the Smoke Room, his metaphysical awareness was condensed into perfect images,

If any God should give
Us leave to fly
These present deaths we live
And safely die

In those last lives we lived ere we were born—
What man but would not laugh the excuse to scorn?

For we are what we are—
So broke to blood
And the strict works of war—
So long subdued

To sacrifice, that threadbare Death commands
Hardly observance at our busier hands.

Yet we were what we were,
And, fashioned so,
It pleases us to stare
At the far show

Of unbelievable years and shapes that flit,
In our own likeness, on the edge of it.

Such a poem is not our century, in any specific sense: in form it might belong to the 17th century. The difficult thought is realised in a clear image, and the rhythm winds round the thought with geometrical exactitude. Such an achievement belongs to the universal types of

poetry, and is exempt from the limitations of the *Zeitgeist*.

THERE exist archetypal images which belong to all time, and which may be transferred from language to language without undue loss. If Kipling's poem were to be skilfully translated into Greek or Latin, French or German, it would not lose its poetic effect, because that effect is metaphysical—idea realised in image, thought felt. The thought process is primary, not in the sense that the poet thinks and then seeks a poetic form of expression for his thought (this is the recipe for bad poetry), but in the sense that the particular poet is a thinker and his thought takes poetic form in the act of expression. This is a rare combination, for the poet is more usually a sensationalist, or possibly an intuitionist, and reacts directly through his imagination—he uses a symbolic rather than a conceptual form of discourse. His activity, we say, is lyrical. Though many images are archetypal, or universal, and reappear repeatedly throughout the course of world literature, the characteristic images of any age are more immediate and sensuous, a direct reaction to individual experience. The archetypal images are not individual in this sense—they are at once collective and unconscious, and any conscious attempt to tap them is apt to produce an effect of banality. The ship of death, for example, is an archetypal image—it occurs in the myths of several cultures, and is particularly familiar to our own cultural tradition in the form of Charon's boat. When, therefore, D. H. Lawrence takes this image as the basis of one of his most ambitious poems, he is under the necessity of reanimating it if he is to avoid the effect of banality. He tries to do this by combining his main universal image with subsidiary and more personal images: the image of the falling apple, that falls to bruise itself an exit from itself—a metaphor for the bruised body, from whose bruised exit the soul oozes. It is doubtful if he is entirely successful—the new and personal image might have been more effective if it had not been associated with an old and familiar image.

The borrowed images in modern poetry are

not always so familiar as Lawrence's Ship of Death. One of the most consistent features of the whole period is its eclecticism—its willingness to search out and incorporate the symbols and myths of past ages. Some degree of eclecticism is characteristic of all historic cultures—distance lends enchantment to the past, and the enchantment is all the stronger the more distant the time. All the poets of our English tradition, from Chaucer to Eliot, have freely borrowed the forms and figures of other cultures. But there is an important distinction to be made at this point, a distinction between assimilation and accretion. When a Shakespeare takes a plot or even a metaphor from Plutarch or Ovid, he absorbs it into his own poetic system, and reproduces it in the terms of his own poetic essence. It is not merely a question of playing Julius Cæsar in Elizabethan costume: Julius Cæsar is an Elizabethan—more than that: he is a projection of Shakespeare's own multiple personality. But when Pound and Eliot take the structure of Greek drama as a framework for their poetic sentiments, they are avoiding the problem of creating a contemporary structure. *Hamlet* is a significant play, not because it relates the tragedy of a Danish prince of the Middle Ages, but because it uses this dim figure of the chronicles as an excuse to present the doubts and indecisions of a humanistic age. "The Waste Land," the most eclectic of Eliot's works, is a mythical landscape, a landscape of broken columns and discarded masks, into which no hero intrudes. Pound's "Cantos," are cluttered with literary stage-props. All is academic vanity. The poet claims that it is not vanity

To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.

Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered.

But the diffidence faltered because it could not fuse the tradition to a modern sensibility—to a consciousness of the modern dilemma. Eliot became aware of that necessity and in the *Four Quartets* redeemed his eclecticism, not in a new myth, but in "aftersight and foresight," in

metaphysics, like Kipling (a comparison he would not find objectionable). Again, the words caress the contour of the thought—

... words I never thought to speak
In streets I never thought I should revisit
When I left my body on a distant shore.

Our eclecticism has been part of a deliberate attempt to provide the 20th century with mythical poetry, ignoring the fact that a myth cannot be consciously imported into a culture, but must emerge gradually from the collective unconscious. When I am informed that Ezra Pound's "Cantos" repeat the pattern of Homer's *Iliad*, or that *The Cocktail Party* has the same dramatic pattern as some play by Euripides, I refuse to be intimidated. All that is merely in line, it seems to me, with the repetition, on some American campus, of the architecture of an Oxford college.

WE MAY conclude that there is no characteristic myth of our age, and that we are not likely to find one where we are looking—in the overt attempts of the poets to create one. We must therefore look for the peculiar virtues of our poetry in its poetic structure—in its diction, idiom, and imagery. We shall at once be aware of a difference from the poetry of other ages.

Let us begin with the image, for that is the original sense-experience of the poet. The poet is original in that he sees things for the first time in a metaphorical relation, either to other things, or to his own feelings. But admittedly it is very difficult to isolate the image as a visual event: it is inevitably expressed in words and we are immediately in doubt about the visuality of the image. In Hardy's poem, which I quoted, the reader may have been struck by the unusual image of the parsley stalk. No poet of our Augustan age would have given such prominence to such a humble plant. Did Hardy depart from poetic usage because his discerning eye had selected the parsley stalk as an object of visual beauty or formal significance, and as such apt for the desired effect of his poem? Or did the phrase, "a parsley stalk," strike his aural sensibility as poetically forceful and expressive? Did eye or ear dictate the

image? Impossible to say, but in any case a new image had been introduced into English poetry, and it is an image characteristic of a certain phase of 20th century poetry—the phase we call "Georgian" in England.

... the yellow flavourous coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined . . .

Edward Thomas

Soft as a bubble sung
Out of a linnet's lung

Ralph Hodgson

Robert Frost will perhaps serve as the transatlantic equivalent:

... ploughing the grain
With a thick thumbnail to show it ran
Across the handle's long drawn serpentine,
Like the two strokes across a dollar sign.

It is true that one may find visual acuity of the same kind in earlier poets—in Marvell, Cotton, Wordsworth, Hopkins—but the objects or actions observed are more conventional, less violent. Wordsworth's acuity is exercised on common objects—on daisies and daffodils—and I doubt if he would have thought a wasp-eaten apple or a bubble or a dollar sign as images worthy of his poetry. His aim was to endow earthly objects with a celestial light; to transfuse matter and spirit; to identify his sensational vision with his mystical vision. The Nature poets of the 20th century are not idealists in this sense, but empiricists. They are satisfied—in so far as they are typical of their time—with the sensory effects of the image, though such an image may be used in a descriptive or sentimental poem where it lies embedded like a barbaric stone in a circlet of gold. It was probably the contrast between the sensory image and a traditional diction that first suggested to T. E. Hulme the isolation of the image. If the image could be identified as the only poetic force within a poem, why not proceed to identify poem and image, as had been the common practice in China or Japan? To cut the cackle—that was to be the first aim of a modern poetry.

But Hulme discovered—as certain French poets had discovered before him—that the cackle could not be cut without a fundamental

change of diction. An image is always jealous of words—that is to say, it is most effective when conveyed in a minimum of words. It proved very difficult to reconcile this minimum with any regular metrical structure, for metre is basically aural and quite independent of imagery. Free verse was not, of course, invented by Hulme, or by anyone else in our century—in some sense it has existed for many centuries, as in Hebrew poetry. Modern experiments began in France about 1880, but these earlier experiments in free verse had been in the interest of rhythm—the desire had been to get away from the monotonous regularity of traditional metres and create new rhythms—rhythms directly expressive of emotional experience. The free verse of Whitman and Henley is of this kind, and is not necessarily accompanied by any particularly vivid imagery.

When therefore Hulme

saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer

he was not merely introducing a sensory image into a poem, but seeking a verse form that would effectively convey the image. Actually, within the limits of seven lines, he found a verse form for a number of images—all images of “Autumn”:

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded.
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

The diction of such a poem is best described as laconic—that is to say, it is just adequate for the occasion. The poetry is in the image, or images, and that, for some time, was to be the distinctive characteristic of 20th century poetry. No other English poetry—no other poetry of the Western World—had hitherto been based so strictly on visual appeal.

THE School of Imagists, which included at one time or another poets like Lawrence and Pound, as well as self-styled Imagists like Aldington and Fling, H. D., Amy Lowell, and

John Gould Fletcher, was not destined to survive the interruption and dispersal of the First World War, but its influence on poetic diction was decisive for a whole generation. Even Yeats, through the direct mediation of Ezra Pound, was influenced and for the better. His diction from 1914 onwards is lean, his imagery precise:

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

Such images, of mice and long-legged flies, will not be found in Yeats's earlier poetry. But it is the substance of Pound's poetry and Eliot's: it is the new imagery of the 20th century. There is no longer an undertone of verbal music, or naturalistic sentiment, as in Hardy's parsley stalk, but a direct appeal to the senses, without benefit of sweet sound—Eliot's patient etherized upon a table, crabs scuttling across the floors of silent seas, newspapers blowing through vacant lots, rats, and broken glass; and Pound's full and fascinating junk-shop.

But such imagery, which might be called Homeric in its directness, is in these two cases contaminated, as it were, by a very un-Homeric eclecticism—by a very unrealistic romanticism, the Classicist and Medievalist romanticism of Eliot, the Troubadour and Orientalist romanticism of Pound. “Eclecticism” is perhaps too superficial in its implications to describe a process that is not deliberate, but rather an automatic release of imagery from what would technically be known as the pre-conscious—that level of the mind just below conscious memory, from which images can be drawn more or less pell-mell in a state of poetic excitement.

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the
year
Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
 To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
 Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
 With caressing hands, at Limoges
 Who walked all night in the next room;
 By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
 By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
 Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp
 Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.
 Vacant shuttles
 Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
 An old man in a draughty house
 Under a windy knob.

These are personal memory-images, and the odd thing is that they should be transferable, so as to constitute indubitable poetry. We do not know, and need not ask, who were Mr. Silvero and Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist and Fräulein von Kulp; any explanation would render them less effective, less poetic.

Effective as these automatic images are when personal to the poet, nothing is so ineffective as a conscious imitation of them: the introduction into verse of arbitrary images, not preceding from whatever depths the poet's mind possesses, but consciously invented to produce a similar effect. One might even go further and say that even when such images are projected automatically, nothing proves to be so dreary as the furniture of an inferior mind. The surrealist movement was responsible for much forced imagery of this kind, and the process itself, which had been so effective in the case of Eliot (and in the case of certain contemporary French poets) was eventually discredited by abuse. The spontaneous memory-image remains, however, a characteristic feature of modern English poetry, and Eliot's significant role in the technical development of modern verse is largely due to his masterly use of the invention.

IMAGIST development in our period does not end with Pound or even with William Carlos Williams, a poet who has sustained the experimental verve of the early days of the movement. The visual image in his verse is always

conveyed without obscuring rhetoric, nakedly:
 (the
 grapes still hanging to
 the vines . . .
 like broken
 teeth in the head of an
 old man)

which, incidentally, is an excellent example of the reversed metaphor so popular with modern poets—the inhuman illuminated by reference to the human. Williams's use and presentation of the image is in the tradition of the Imagist School, but his poetry is not exclusively imagist—he might, indeed, be called a moralist—a laconic commentator on the contemporary American scene. He is exceptional in that he has transferred to a conceptual type of verse ideals of economy and precision that were evolved for a perceptual type of verse. To that visual clarity of the image corresponds a logical definition that takes an aphoristic form.

It might be possible to trace the Imagist influence into wider fields and even to find it in unexpected places, but it gradually became merged in that efflorescence of metaphor which I believe is predominantly Celtic in its origins. Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was partly responsible for it, was strongly influenced by Welsh poetry, and the chief representative of this metaphorical school has been a Welshman, Dylan Thomas. But we must not forget the influence on Thomas of surrealism, and, indirectly through surrealism, of the new significance which began to be attached to the dream image and to automatic projections of the symbols of the unconscious. All those influences created a metaphorical ferment in the mind of this young poet which at first was too private in its references to convey any emotion:

Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam,
 The cancer's fusion, or the summer feather
 Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever,
 Nor city tar and subway bored to foster
 Man through macadam.

Rimbaud wrote such poetry, and it is not surprising to find it transubstantiated in English words. But the reader cannot endure the

blind fury of it for more than the course of a few stanzas, and Thomas soon realised the limitations of this method. He worked towards simplicity and clarity, without sacrificing any of the force of the far-fetched image.

Her flesh was meek as milk, but this skyward statue
With the wild beast and blessed and giant skull
Is carved from her in a room with a wet window
In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year.
I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands
Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare
Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;
And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone.

There are images here that are specifically modern, in the sense already discussed. "Her fist of a face clenched on a round pain"—I do not think an image like that would have occurred to a poet writing before 1910; though if we skip the centuries we shall find an analogue in Shakespeare's description of the death of Falstaff; and there is Anglo-Saxon sparseness and dinned anvil-clangour in the concentrated monosyllabic words:

... her death was a still drop;
She would not have me sink in the holy
Flood of her heart's fame; she would lie dumb and
deep
And need no druid of her broken body . . .

DYLAN THOMAS's images were threaded to coherent themes of birth and death, of love and sorrow—human, universal themes, to which he gave a fresh, contemporary expression. But these few ideas were intuitive—static convictions rather than the products of a philosophical activity. Dylan Thomas is not singular in this respect. It is, indeed, difficult to discern in 20th century poetry any common ideological trend, such as we find in the Romantic Movement from, say, 1780–1830. We have had ideological poets—Mr. Eliot is one. Mr. Pound has a political philosophy and Mr. Auden is dogmatic in an offhand way. But these three typical poets of the period have nothing in common, ideologically speaking, and certainly have no common philosophy of art, such as the Romantics had. Each poet

expresses, in a personal way, his private philosophy, and in an age such as ours, when there is no integral social consciousness, we need not pay any particular respect to a philosophy that claims to be universal. Catholic philosophy, for example, is universal for those who have made a personal choice to be orthodox Christians. It was different in the Middle Ages, or in Dante's time, when no personal choice was involved. Catholicism was then an expression of the social consciousness, and the individual was dissolved in that consciousness, and did not assert a separate and personal consciousness. We, who have no integral social consciousness, have only a *Zeitgeist* to substitute for it, and this super-individual manifestation, of which we are rarely conscious, is historical, not universal. It is a product of a particular environment—of economic and social conditions—and after the passage of a generation or two, is seen as a deception.

Romanticism, in its most general sense, is the only attempt since the end of the Middle Ages to construct a universal philosophy. Hegel, in this sense, is a Romantic philosopher. Romanticism is essentially a philosophy of immanence, as Catholicism had been a philosophy of transcendence; it remains a philosophy of immanence when allied to poetry. Poetry, indeed, is an essential instrument of this philosophy, for, as Schelling claimed, the immanent spirit of the universe is manifested through poetry, including the plastic arts and music. Poetry has thus the role of revelation in this immanent religion, and the only universal philosophy of poetry, since the Middle Ages, gives to the poet the priest-like function of meditation.

The Romantic poets of 1780–1830 accepted this role. Goethe and Schiller, Hölderlin and Novalis, Wordsworth and Coleridge, saw themselves as performing a priest-like task, and they sought for the best method of ensuring the immediate communication of their vision. The triumph of materialism in the 19th century brought discredit or ridicule on this Romantic philosophy, but only at the cost of a further and more drastic disintegration of social consciousness. Nietzsche, the last of the great Romantic philosophers, proclaimed the death

of God; Marx substituted the vision of a society integrated on a basis of common wealth. But poetry in any universal sense had died with God, and all our efforts, since the middle of the 19th century, have been fragmentary and individualistic.

Some of us attempt to recover the universal philosophy of the Middle Ages—to resurrect the transcendental God; others seek to revive the universal philosophy of Romanticism—to recover the pantheistic intuitions of the Romantic poets. But the Romantic poets realised that the act of mediation was a poetic act, and not an intellectual effort. Revelation was made evident in the structure and imagery of poetry. For a short time in our century—the time between the birth of Imagism and the return to traditional forms in the thirties—it seemed as though an effort would be made to recover this immediacy of inspiration, but there was no supporting ethos: what ethos there was came from revolutionary politics, and was essentially anti-poetic; it acted on the false assumption that society could be unified on a materialistic basis. It is too early to proclaim the failure of the new Romanticism—did it not, in Dylan Thomas, produce a poet who continued the tradition on its highest level? But Thomas, though he had a following, is nevertheless an isolated figure—he has no significance for our materialistic civilisation. He wrote “for the love of man and in praise of God,” but he wrote in subjective solitude.

Yeats was probably the only poet of our age who had some understanding of the poet’s predicament. He has been ridiculed for trying to find a substitute religion in astrology and spiritualism, but his naïve effort is not necessarily more absurd than the attempt to revive a medieval thearchy. He dared, until he was disillusioned, to believe in a rebirth of Gaelic Ireland—free from commercialism and materialism. He may have underestimated the difficulty of effecting any correspondence between a practical level of experience and a symbolic level of experience—between act and grace, achievement and glory, ceremony and

innocence. But in the end Yeats knew that just as

twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed into righteousness by a rocking cradle

So we must await, and might in our darkness expect, a Second Coming—

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

I HAVE been sparing of names in this survey of the drift of 20th century poetry, but let us look back across the chart for a moment. There was one clear line of progress—the isolation and clarification of the image, and the perfecting of a diction that would leave the image unclouded by rhetoric or sentiment. To that task our greatest poets—Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Thomas—devoted their best energies. But now there is a failure of nerve: eyes are dazzled, and once again a veil of rhetoric is drawn over the vision of the poet. Sentiment supersedes sensation, the poetic consciousness is corrupted. Many individual voices rise again in the dusk. Yeats dead, Pound silenced, Eliot lost to the theatre, Thomas gone before his time—it is the hour of the twittering machines. We listen to them as we drink our martinis or smoke a cigarette, and for an hour or two we feel content. Then the night comes and there is no voice to fill the silence. That is not as it used to be. Poetry used to be in speech, in transaction, in worship; at the banquet, before the battle, in the moment of birth and burial. Why is poetry no longer our daily bread? We have to search for an answer to this question, and the search leads us to the foundation of our society. We have the poetry we deserve, just as we have the painting we deserve, the music we deserve; and if it is fragmented, personal, spasmodic, we have only to look around us to see the satanic chaos through which nevertheless a few voices have penetrated. The voices are pitched high and may sound discordant; but sometimes they convey an image that has a crystalline brightness and hardness, and cannot be shrouded.

T. R. Fyvel

The Purposive Society

Notes on a visit to Israel

THE well-known landscape is the same, only the figures in the foreground have changed. When one travelled through Palestine during the years of the British Mandate, one's attention was continuously attracted by the shrill, triangular Arab-Jewish-British conflict. Today, the dust of that battle is gone, and so are most of the Arabs and all the British. What remains is the state of Israel, which covers the greater part of Palestine, and the contrast between the new utilitarian colonisation and the brooding landscape against which it is set.

In Tel Aviv and Haifa, or where the traffic moves continuously through citrus country on the coastal road between these two cities, life in Israel has already a remarkably settled look. (And yet, for quite a stretch the frontier runs practically alongside this road: at one point in the coastal plain of Sharon, where Israel is at its narrowest, it approaches to within ten miles of the sea—not much room here for “defence in depth.”) Beyond this frontier, as far as the average Israeli is concerned, lies the whole unknown Middle East of the Arabs. It is an unquiet frontier, from which the sound of shooting is seldom absent. Arabs infiltrate, Israelis retaliate, the larger incidents make the international press headlines, and in the councils of the United Nations heads are solemnly shaken. Yet these Israeli-Arab armed clashes, which are always in the news, involve only the civilian inhabitants of the frontier settlements, who are probably not more than 2 per

cent of the population. Indeed, behind the thin khaki line of their young soldiers on the frontier the Israelis have been proceeding undeterred to meet the challenge set by the proclamation of the state.

You can see most of the aspects of this challenge in Beersheba. The Negev is the half-fertile, half-desert southern triangle of Israel that is only now being developed, and Beersheba is its natural capital. Before 1948, it had been little more than a dusty, overgrown Arab village, a centre for local Bedouins, its regular inhabitants numbering about 1200 Arabs and a handful of bored British police. Today, the Israeli Government is working to turn Beersheba into a busy industrial and communications centre of some 40,000 prospective inhabitants, and about 20,000 people are already there, mostly new Oriental-Jewish immigrants. One is driven round neat planning zones, new housing estates of simple apartment blocks or identical small houses, shopping arcades and restaurants, and yet more building plots. Laundry flutters from balconies, and the whole scene has a slightly suburban look: was it necessary to create this new conurbation on this ancient site? Yet on closer view, one sees the other side. Not less than 180,000 trees have been planted in and around New Beersheba, and presently they must effect their transformation. You see the new theatre, as a building still starkly isolated, but already paying its way as combined cinema, concert hall, and theatre. You can go into Beersheba's large new central